The Experience of Specific Student Populations

Institutions participating in NSSE have provided hundreds of examples demonstrating wide-ranging uses of NSSE data. Diagnostic, actionable information on student engagement catalyzes vital, sometimes challenging conversations on campus about the quality of undergraduate education. This brief focuses on one theme among these examples.

The examples featured in this brief highlight NSSE data uses related to understanding the needs of specific student populations. Knowing the distinctive engagement patterns, for example, of first-year students, transfer students, or commuter students can suggest strategies to improve the educational experience and outcomes of these students through changes in such areas as programming, advising, institutional communications, and campus resources.

**IMPROVING THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE**

As part of their accreditation review with the Higher Learning Commission, the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), in 2010, completed a Foundations of Excellence® self-study of nine dimensions of their first-year students’ experience, using NSSE results and over 200 other sources of data to evaluate key performance indicators. Areas identified as needing better measures to track progress informed the development of an action plan to improve first-year student learning. One response to the self-study was to develop and measure first-year learning outcomes. For example, UNI’s FY Outcome #1 states, “By the end of the first year, students will be able to articulate and examine their personal values.” NSSE items used to track progress toward this outcome include “During the current school year, how often have you examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue?” and “During the current school year, how often have you learned something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept?” Results from these NSSE items helped UNI shape a first-year experience program that supports the academic and social transition of incoming students.

**REDESIGNING THE FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR**

In fall 2012, University of Mount Union launched a new four-credit, topic-based, e-Portfolio-supported first-year seminar (FYS), replacing the former one-credit introduction to college course. In the redesigned course, all FYS instructors are full-time faculty and serve as the students’ first-year academic advisors. To assess the redesigned FYS, Mount Union reviewed results from their 2013 and 2015 NSSE administrations. NSSE 2013 reports were shared with department chairs, faculty, students, and administrators, who reviewed the results in multiple forums such as student senate meetings, presentations, and focus groups. Among other findings, the 2013 results indicated that Mount Union’s first-year students rated the quality of their interactions lower compared to ratings by their counterparts at peer and aspirant institutions.

**WHAT IS YOUR NSSE DATA USE STORY?**

Our growing collection of stories about how NSSE institutions use their results is a shared resource for colleges and universities, and assists in our continuing efforts to improve the quality of the undergraduate experience. Please contact your NSSE Project Services team to share examples highlighting your institution’s uses of NSSE data, usage strategies, and special activities.

nsse.indiana.edu/html/staff.cfm
Based on this finding, the FYS core group decided to link additional FYS enhancements to NSSE’s Quality of Interactions Engagement Indicator. To do so, faculty collaborated with the first-year experience (FYE) director to introduce co-curricular activities into the course and to encourage a seamless learning environment both inside and outside the classroom. Starting in fall 2014, each FYS class was assigned a peer mentor to guide students through co-curricular and transitional issues. Instructors also worked with the FYE director to implement early intervention strategies for students. Mount Union’s NSSE 2015 Quality of Interaction results showed improvement and, indeed, were higher than those of peer and aspirant institutions. Mount Union continues to use their NSSE 2015 data to identify and explore further actions to enhance their students’ first-year experience.

Furthermore, transfer students were less likely to participate in co-curricular activities due to family responsibilities and commuting time—findings with important implications for WMU’s programs and practices for nonacademic support for students. Recommendations based on these findings included a range of initiatives to support transfer student transition, including more evening course offerings and expansion of WMU offerings at local community colleges. In addition, WMU developed long-term trend workbooks that display comparison results for individual survey items—over seven years for NSSE and six years for FSSE.

**ENGAGING COMMUTER STUDENTS**

NSSE data are integral to the University of West Florida’s (UWF) accreditation activities with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. In 2015, UWF established a Quality Enhancement Plan titled “Communication for Professional Success” focusing on high-impact practices (HIPs), with an emphasis on written and spoken communication outcomes. An action team was established to review the relevant assessment data, including UWF’s 2014 NSSE results. This review, in addition to reinforcing the university’s interest in expanding the implementation of communication HIPs, helped spark a new focus on commuter students—a substantial proportion of the UWF student population. Unsurprisingly, less than half of these students reported participating in activities outside the classroom. Using these findings, UWF launched a campaign to connect commuter students to campus information, events, and activities—so as to facilitate their lifelong connections to the institution by broadening their awareness of campus resources, improving their participation rates, and increasing the number of students living on campus.

**ASSESSING TRANSFER STUDENT NEEDS**

As part of the planning priorities of Western Michigan University (WMU) for 2011–12, the University’s Office of Institutional Effectiveness presented findings to the provost’s council about differences between the engagement of students who transfer to WMU and that of students who began their undergraduate careers at WMU. Selected findings from the staff’s examination of results from three consecutive years of NSSE administrations showed that transfer students were less likely to work with faculty outside of class, to complete a field-based experience, to participate in community service, or to complete a culminating senior project—key goals of WMU’s strategic plan.

Lessons from the Field

See our Lessons from the Field series for many more instructive and inspiring narratives from colleges and universities describing the innovative ways they put NSSE results into action.

nsse.indiana.edu/links/lessons_home

*Western Michigan University*